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SUBJECT: AHMADINEJAD IN TAJIKISTAN, CALLS TIES "STRATEGIC"

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[1](#). (SBU) Summary: Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad paid a 24-hour state visit to Dushanbe. He signed economic and social agreements with Tajik President Emomali Rahmon, few of which were new or substantive. The Iranians committed to provide \$6 million to complete the long-delayed Istiqlol tunnel north of Dushanbe and agreed to look into building a hydroelectric dam on the Zaravshan River. The Iranians and Tajiks signed agreements on extradition, cooperation in earth sciences, and parliamentary cooperation. Rahmon publicly supported Iran's right to pursue a "peaceful nuclear program," while Ahmadinejad delivered a screed against world superpowers seeking to trample Iran's rights. Despite the show of solidarity, a significant gulf remains between Tajikistan and Iran. End summary.

[2](#). (U) Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad paid a 24-hour state visit to Dushanbe this week, arriving on the morning of January 4 and departing the next day. Ahmadinejad was accompanied by presidential advisor Esfandiar Rahim Mashaie, the Iranian Ministers of Foreign Affairs, Defense, Energy, Oil, Roads and Transport, seven parliamentary deputies, the Secretary General of Iran's Red Crescent Society, and several deputy ministers. During the visit Tajik and Iranian officials reportedly signed three letters of understanding, two documents and one joint statement on bilateral cooperation. The delegation left for Turkmenistan on January 5.

DUSHANBE YAWNS

[3](#). (SBU) Ahmadinejad's visit produced the usual snarl of traffic as police closed Dushanbe's two main streets to make way for official motorcades. While coverage in the local media was widespread, the visit did not even make the top slot in many news programs; this went to the ongoing epic struggle to build Roghun (Ref A). A number of diplomats failed show up at the MFA-organized lineup to greet Ahmadinejad at the airport. The Ambassador of Russia, for example, told us he was "too busy." Local news coverage was positive, although outside sources had more critical comments. Andrey Gusev, writing in CentrAsia.ru, said Tajikistan and Iran were hardly soulmates, but Tajikistan risked making relations even worse by attempting to extort assistance from the Iranians by coyly threatening to cozy up to the Americans if the funding didn't materialize. At the same time, he said, it was not lost on the Iranians that much of the money they provided ended up in the pockets of senior Tajik officials.

Iranians Pledge to Finish Tunnel, Build New Power Plants

[4](#). (U) The Iranian Ministry of Energy signed an agreement with its Tajik counterpart to explore the construction of a new dam

and hydropower plant on the Zaravshan River north of Dushanbe. With the recent completion of the South-North electrical transmission line, the Zaravshan Valley is the only major region of the country not connected to a domestic grid. The valley's three districts continue to receive their power from Uzbekistan on a pre-payment basis. Since Uzbekistan's withdrawal from the Central Asian unified energy grid, however, increasing Tajikistan's energy self-reliance has become the government's single biggest priority (refs A and B). According to news reports, Iran's Farab Company signed an agreement with Tajik state electricity company Barqi Tojik to conduct a feasibility study for the Ayni Dam, which, according to Tajik Minister of Energy and Industry Gul Sherali, will produce up to 170 MW of electricity. The Iranian and Tajik presidents discussed ways to speed up construction of the 220 MW Sangtuda-2 hydropower plant, as well as prospects for collaborating on a small 21 MW power plant on the Iskandardarya River, also in the Zaravshan Valley, and the 870 MW Shurob hydropower station. Sherali said the Iranians also would help Tajikistan train personnel for its oil and gas sector and would participate in exploration and development of gas fields in Tajikistan.

15. (U) The Iranian delegation finally agreed to allocate \$6 million -- a \$1 million grant and a \$5 million preferential loan -- to complete the Istiqlol (or Anzob) Tunnel on the highway linking Dushanbe and the north of Tajikistan. Iranian Ambassador to Tajikistan Ali-Asghar Sherdoust announced in September 2009 that the grant was authorized but the two governments were working out the repayment structure for the loan. Although President Rahmon presided with great fanfare over the official opening of the tunnel more than three years ago, the project remains in a dangerous state of incompleteness. The tunnel, which is the only all-weather route between the central and northern parts of the country, suffers from massive drainage and ventilation problems, an uneven road surface, and frequent closures.

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Other Cooperation

16. (U) Tajikistan's Main Geology Directorate signed an agreement with the Iranian Ministry of Industry and Mines to establish "national centers for earth studies, geomatics, and information technologies" in Tajikistan, according to media reports. Tajik Prosecutor-General Bobojon Bobkhonov and Iranian Foreign Minister Manouchehr Mottaki signed an agreement on extradition of criminals, although details of the accord have not yet emerged. The Tajik and Iranian presidents signed a joint statement on promoting bilateral cooperation, and Ahmadinejad, during a meeting with the Chairman of Tajikistan's Majlisi Namoyandagon (lower house of Parliament) agreed to expand parliamentary cooperation. Ahmadinejad announced that Iran has ratified a bill to set up cultural centers in 26 countries, including Tajikistan.

Rahmon Supports Iran's "Right to a Peaceful Nuclear Program"

17. (U) At a joint news conference with Ahmadinejad, Rahmon said Tajikistan supported "Iran's right to a peaceful nuclear program at all levels." Ahmadinejad responded that Tehran's ties to Dushanbe were "strategic, profound, consolidated, and durable." According to official state statistics, trade turnover between the two countries totaled \$115 million over the first 11 months of 2009. The majority of this was Tajik imports from Iran, including building materials, foodstuffs, electricity equipment, household appliances, and agricultural products (ref C).

...While Ahmadinejad Lashes Out at "Bullying Powers," U.S.

18. (U) Ahmadinejad used the occasion of a visit to Iranian residents of Dushanbe to deliver the usual screed against outside intervention in Iran's affairs, saying Iran would "under no circumstances give up even one iota of its legitimate rights." He said the era of colonialism was over, although others continued to try to trample Iran's rights. Iran was

leading the way, however. "The name of the Islamic Republic of Iran manifests culture, arts and justice in the world while the name of the U.S. demonstrates torture, looting, killing, and crimes for world public opinion." Tajikistan and Iran were on the same side of this battle, he said, sharing a culture and values. Note: Tajik Minister of Culture Mirzoshokhura Asrori canceled an unofficial trip to Israel to attend the Congress of Bukharan Jews, which took place on January 5 in Tel Aviv. Organizers in Israel speculated that he could not afford to be seen going to Israel during Ahmadinejad's visit.

¶9. (SBU) Comment: Despite their (partly) shared cultural and linguistic heritage, Iranian and Tajik leaders often view each other with more distrust than bonhomie (ref C). Ahmadinejad's visit does little to change this impression. The agreements signed by the two countries either tread old ground (Anzob tunnel), are preliminary (Ayni hydropower station), or have little substance (the rest of them). Rahmon's endorsement of Iran's pursuit of "peaceful" nuclear power contrasts with Tajikistan's efforts to court support from anyone who will give it, including the United States and even Israel. Against this backdrop, such statements remind us that talk is cheap. End comment.
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